

INTERNATIONAL LONGSHORE AND WAREHOUSE UNION
PACIFIC COAST PENSIONERS ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LABOR ARCHIVES OF WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
HERB HOWE OF ILWU LOCAL 500, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: HERB HOWE

INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

SUBJECTS: ASBESTOS; AMALGAMATION; CONTAINERIZATION; EXECUTIVE BOARD; CASUALS;
ANTI-NEPOTISM RULES

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** This is part of the Pacific Coast Pensioners Oral History Project. Can you give us your name and your date of birth and where you were born?

[00:00:20] **HERB HOWE:** Herb Howe, Local 500, Vancouver, Canada. I was born in Vienna, Austria.

[00:00:28] **HARVEY:** You were?

[00:00:28] **HERB:** Yes.

[00:00:31] **HARVEY:** How long did you spend in Austria?

[00:00:32] **HERB:** 10 days? I was born during the war. The house got bombed out, so my parents moved on.

[00:00:47] **HARVEY:** What year were you born again?

[00:00:51] **HERB:** 1944.

[00:00:54] **HARVEY:** Your parents moved on. Where did they move on to?

[00:00:56] **HERB:** Well, they moved from Austria to Germany. My dad came to Canada in 1953. We moved to Canada in 1954, so I've been there ever since. Vancouver.

[00:01:15] **HARVEY:** Are you bilingual? Do you speak German?

[00:01:17] **HERB:** Yes, a little bit. It's been a long time. I have nobody to speak German to. My mum and dad both passed away so they're the only ones I used to speak German to. And my sister, but she passed away, too. It's a limited amount. I can still converse, but that's the way it is. Do the best we can.

[00:01:41] **HARVEY:** Those are difficult times obviously. What do you remember from the difficult times of that period?

[00:01:47] **HERB:** Not a darn thing. I remember when I'm here in Canada, but I don't remember anything from the old country. I never got to go back. I wish I would have when my mum and dad were alive, but we've had relatives come over. But that was quite a while ago.

[00:02:11] **HARVEY:** What was your dad doing in Canada?

[00:02:15] **HERB:** When he first came, he worked for the railroad. Then he worked for Cassiar Asbestos [Mining Company]. He was instrumental in getting the union into Cassiar. He organized the guys there, got it in. That's how I got hooked on the job.

[00:02:36] **HARVEY:** What union did he organize there?

[00:02:39] **HERB:** ILWU. It was a coastwise section. That was before the amalgamation in the Port of Vancouver. There used to be different locals, and then they all amalgamated into Local 500. I started in coastwise also, Local 509.

[00:03:01] **HARVEY:** Tell me a little bit about the period of life before you find the union, before you get involved in the union. You go to school in Canada?

[00:03:08] **HERB:** Yes, I went to school. I wasn't the greatest student, but I went to school. [laughs] Went through high school, or most of the way through. In '61, my dad got me hired on where he worked, at Cassiar Asbestos. When I saw the checks, I didn't really have any interest in going back! It was a good job. But he went in and got me fired to go back to school, and I went to school for another year. In '63, I started on the waterfront.

[00:03:44] **HARVEY:** Can you tell us about the first day on the job?

[00:03:50] **HERB:** They had a pick. The dispatcher used to go, "You, you, and you." I worked over at Cassiar with sacks of asbestos and things like that, sacs of ore. We also loaded the smaller coastal ships that did all the groceries up and down the coast. It was quite interesting.

[00:04:17] **HARVEY:** Ever any difficulty behind the asbestos product, in terms of health?

[00:04:22] **HERB:** Well, I have asbestos in both lungs. Pretty well anybody that worked the raw asbestos has difficulty—has asbestos in the lungs because once it goes in, it doesn't come out.

[00:04:40] **HARVEY:** When did you guys figure out that asbestos was a problem?

[00:04:46] **HERB:** For years, they used to say, "Don't worry about it. Don't be a wimp," and all that. It wasn't until the longshoremen in England refused to handle the burlap sacks. Then, what they did is they plasticized them, but the sacks were still torn. When the sacks are torn, that's what happens, you get the asbestos. I know when we worked at Cassiar, on a summer day, if you going the lower road, which is about a couple city blocks, you couldn't see the ship. The only thing you could see was maybe the smokestack, maybe where the captain's

bridge is, maybe the top of the derricks. The rest of the ship, you couldn't see anything. It was all shiny little sparks. That's just the way it was. Forklift driving and just pumping it up.

[00:05:43] **HARVEY:** Now, Cassius, is that a shipping firm?

[00:05:50] **HERB:** Cassiar Asbestos, they had a big mine up north. It was the dock where they loaded the asbestos. Unloaded from when it came down from the north. They ended up putting it on ships and shipping it all over the place. Right next to it was White Pass; they still have the White Pass-Yukon [railroad] up there. The White Pass was the area where you did the groceries and a lot of that for [shipping to the Yukon]. They had the ship called the Clifford J. Rogers and the Harry H. Brown and those kind of things. The Clifford J. Rogers was an older ship, but the Brown and the Klondike, they were actually some of the early gantry ships.

Cassiar and White Pass were actually one of the earliest where they containerized stuff. They used to have people from Japan and everywhere else coming to look at how the containers worked. After that, it just kind of took over everywhere. Which was ok, but we had to stuff the containers and take it out. Take the asbestos out of containers, load other stuff in to get shipped back up north.

[00:07:17] **HARVEY:** You'd stuff containers, too?

[00:07:21] **HERB:** Oh, yes.

[00:07:22] **HARVEY:** Was there ever any effort to sue the employer over the asbestos problem?

[00:07:32] **HERB:** I don't really think so. The Compensation Board, they used to say there's no asbestosis [lung disease from asbestos] or anything like that in B.C. They have it in Alberta, which is a neighboring province, or in Ontario, but it's not in B.C. They gave you all kinds of other things like airways diseases and that kind of stuff. A lot of the guys my dad worked with—he was a sampler so he was in a ten by ten room the sacks open. When he passed on, he wasn't in very good shape. Most of the guys over there [shrugs slightly], very few of them left. Very few. I think there's only one that I know of.

[00:08:18] **HARVEY:** Let me ask you: did you work other products?

[00:08:22] **HERB:** Oh, yes. Not at Cassiar. I worked all over the port.

[00:08:26] **HARVEY:** You did? What kind of products?

[00:08:30] **HERB:** We worked on concentrates. I got to be a millwright and a mechanic for a while. That's the beauty about the waterfront: you can upgrade and train yourself. I worked at a lot of the bulk sites, which is everything from concentrates, lead, copper, phos [phate] rock, potash, sulfur, and coal. I worked at Vancouver Wharves, which handled the sulfur, potash, and concentrates. Neptune [Terminals] handled the potash and phos rock. PCT [Pacific Coast Terminals] used to handle coal, but then they changed over straight to sulfur. These are the bulks that they handled.

[00:09:31] **HARVEY:** What was the worst product that you ever dealt with, in terms of the work itself?

[00:09:38] **HERB:** I didn't like hides. [laughs] When they got the big steer hides that were especially caught on the prairies for a while in the summer, man, they were pretty rotten.

The rest of it, when we worked our way through, it wasn't too bad. You kind of build up your muscles where you need them. When I first started the coastwise, I worked there for a while and then moved over to the deep sea section. That was in '63 when they got the Russian flour, which were sacks of flour, maybe 112 pounds of

flour. The first couple of weeks it was a little tough. After that, you built up what you needed, and away you went.

[00:10:23] **HARVEY:** You mentioned you were at Local 509 initially. Consolidation occurred in 1966, so you'd been there just a couple, three years. Did you have any take on it? What did you think about all that? What were the politics like at the time?

[00:10:41] **HERB:** I moved over to deep sea long before the amalgamation. In the coastwise at that time, if you didn't do the dispatcher favors, he wouldn't give you a job. Four of us, he told us one time to come up on the weekend to paint his fence. We told him to go fly a kite, and that was the last job we got out of him. When other guys [dispatchers] were there, we got jobs, but then we moved over to deep sea. Then it was a different ballgame. There it was a different system where you went in rotation. It was a better system.

[00:11:24] **HARVEY:** In the American courts, that was the kind of thing—forcing you to do favors for a gang boss or a dispatcher—that they fought strenuously to get rid of in 1934. One of the issues in the big strike. You still had that kind of thing in the 1960s?

[00:11:52] **HERB:** Yes. There was just that one dispatcher. For a small group of guys, that's what it was. We bucked it, and we said, no, we're not doing that. Then he wouldn't give you a job. That's when we transferred over to the deep sea local, which had a better system.

[00:12:13] **HARVEY:** How many people were at Local 509 at the time that dispatcher was doing that?

[00:12:19] **HERB:** Well, he did that only to the casuals, to the new guys. It wasn't the members. They got to pick their jobs. The new guys, before they became members, that's how you got the job. The members, they were good. When, like, Frank Kennedy dispatched, he's fair. If you got a job yesterday, then the next guy got a job the next day. Same as when Jimmy Wilkinson was there. These were fair. It was just the one dispatcher, but he was the senior dispatcher. He got elected to that job, and that's what he did to the casuals. I used to talk to my dad about it, and he said, "Just bite the bullet. He'll move up, and you'll do okay." But then we transferred over. Everything was good. Relatively.

[00:13:12] **HARVEY:** What was the kind of work you did when you moved over to the deep sea local?

[00:13:16] **HERB:** For the first number of months, it was sacks. You know, the flour. It was called Russian flour. 112 pound burlap sacks. You start at the bottom of the livery ship, and you work your way all the way to the top. For months and months on end, that's what we did. That or timbers, hand-stowed lumber on the smaller ships. The bull work.

[00:13:43] **HARVEY:** They were still using Liberties [World War II-era cargo ship] at that time?

[00:13:45] **HERB:** Oh yes, yes. And others. In those times, the Liberties were being phased out because they were too small. They were getting into the bigger ships. First year or two, they were still in there.

[00:14:06] **HARVEY:** Do you remember the time in 1966 that the statutory holidays were being taken away—or not being taken away, but the employers wouldn't pay for the statutory holidays? In 1966. Nine vice presidents plus President Smith went to jail for a while. Do you remember all about that?

[00:14:30] **HERB:** I remember some of it. It was quite a while ago. I wasn't that involved in the union at that time. '66 I was on the 8,000 board, so that was the board just before I got in the union. I got in the union in '67—same year I got married. After that, things changed. In the early days like that, when we were casuals, hadn't been married yet, we were just out having fun! Working and just having fun.

[00:15:10] **HARVEY:** What did you call the board that you were on before you got into the union?

[00:15:13] **HERB:** The 8,000 board.

[00:15:14] **HARVEY:** Why did they call it that?

[00:15:16] **HERB:** Every board and every step of the casual—there was the disks, which were little disks, and you throw them in the tube. There might be 100 disks in there. As they go down, the guy at dispatch would pull it out of the bottom. There was your number, and then you got the job. The next one was the plates, which was the first one where you actually got a plate where you could turn it over so you make yourself available. It went up; there was the 7,000 board, the 8,000 board. Every progression was another. . . [spinning motion with hand] It felt good going up another board; you got a better job, opportunity and sometimes better jobs. It worked out well.

[00:16:11] **HARVEY:** Do you know where the terms came from—7,000 and 8,000?

[00:16:16] **HERB:** Those were the numbers that you started with. When I first started, every time you moved up a board, they changed your man number. Like when I was in coastwise, my first number was 97156. When we changed over, you got a 16,000 number. Every time you moved up a board, they give you a new number. But that got changed a number of years later. You got one number, and I guess they scrambled them all. Everybody got a new number, and that's the number you stuck with.

[00:16:49] **HARVEY:** You mentioned working hides. Was there a product that you worked that was a favorite, that was other than arduous?

[00:16:58] **HERB:** I enjoyed working on the waterfront doing pretty well everything. In those days, if you had a good group of people to work with, every day was just a good time. You had a lot of laughs, a lot of fun. If somebody didn't feel good, everybody covered up for the guy—as long as the same guy wasn't sick all the time. We had a good group of people and had a lot of fun. For me, it was a good experience going through. I had a good time.

[00:17:40] **HARVEY:** Did you get involved in union politics? Running for office, committees, or whatever?

[00:17:44] **HERB:** I think it was '72. That was the first time I ran. '72, '74. I ran for the executive, made it, and then, from '72 till I quit, I was there most of the time. I'd be in a few years; might be out one year. Didn't run for the executive, ran for the caucus. That kind of stuff. So I was in there quite a while.

[00:18:15] **HARVEY:** Did you ever run for a title office? Secretary, treasurer, president, or something like that?

[00:18:20] **HERB:** No, I was always content working in the back, just helping the members and so forth. I was on quite a variety of committees.

[00:18:32] **HARVEY:** Which one do you remember the best?

[00:18:36] **HERB:** Well, I remember them all but I was on the Membership and Grievance [Committee] for quite a few years.

[00:18:41] **HARVEY:** Any stories around that? Any stories that illustrate a point or were funny or whatever?

[00:18:46] **HERB:** Well, no, I won't say anything. [laughs] I don't want to get anybody into trouble.

[00:18:52] **HARVEY:** It's probably the best story!

[00:18:55] **HERB:** No, no, it was good.

[00:18:56] **HARVEY:** Can you tell it without any names?

[00:19:00] **HERB:** Well, no. I remember, the first time I became the chairman of the committee, the president called me in and said, "Look, if you have any aspirations of running for office, don't take the job. Because, at the end of the year, it doesn't matter what. Half the guys you deal with are going to hate you." If one person charges another person, if I find them not guilty, the guy who charged him thinks you're not a nice guy. If it's the other way around. . . [shrugs] So, half the guys you deal with, well, you know. But it worked out at the end of the day. They were right. You start off getting a good number of votes, and every year it goes down. You go back, and it works out.

But it's a job that had to be done. In a lot of cases, we were also responsible for the casual moves up. There was quite a few guys that for whatever reason didn't move when they should have. I know when I took over, we got to a stage, and I told the committee that we don't look at names. All we look at is the man number, the work number. It didn't matter who they were or what they were. If they worked and did what we asked them, they would move. I had a few guys come up after and say thanks, because they were held back for years. We did well in that way. We kept everything above board.

What we did, too, in the process over a number of years, we opened it up so every casual could look at where he was and make sure. Every casual had a number, and we posted it so they could see. We gave them a number. If a guy was 1000, if all of a sudden somebody jumped ahead of him, he could come in and say, "Hey! What's going on?" It got to a stage where it was kind of self-policing. That worked well because, if somebody came in, if there was a mistake made, we could correct it. The guys could keep track. Never any funny business. Guys knew where they were and it was done as honest and as fair as we could do it. A lot of the guys appreciated that.

[00:21:38] **HARVEY:** How about being on the executive board? Do you remember any incidents on the executive, any particularly difficult beefs that you had to deal with? Or negotiating stories?

[00:21:47] **HERB:** Well, with the beefs, if you're a person that has an opinion on things, you get into some pretty good arguments. A couple times guys want to come over the table to get at you. At the end of the day, when you leave the door, when the meeting's over, the majority ruled. A lot of times you don't like it, but, if you got outvoted, you got outvoted.

The first time I got on the executive, I had some kind of beef. It was so important that I can't even remember what it was. My third meeting on the executive, I get in there. I made a motion to resolve that issue, and it ended up that it passed unanimously. I walked out feeling pretty good, saying, "I don't know what's the matter with these guys. This wasn't hard!" [laughs] And I waited. Nothing happened for a month. Nothing happened for two months. About two and half months into it, at one of the meetings I said, "Hey, we passed that motion unanimously. What the hell's going on? Nothing's changed!" I remember Frank Kennedy—he used to come to our house when my dad started getting the union involved, he was kind of a mentor—he looked at me, and he said, "Yes, Herbie. We were all waiting. What have you done?" I said, "I got the motion passed." He said, "Yes, but that's the easy part. Now what have you done to achieve it?" Then I realized, 'uh-oh! That isn't so easy!' After that he gave me a lot of pointers, and quite a few other guys gave me pointers over the years on how to get things actually done. Easy to make a motion. Then to actually get it enforced and get the employer to say 'yes,' when he says 'no,' that wasn't easy. You had to do a lot of conniving to get that done. But, yes, you do that. That was the fun part.

[00:24:05] **HARVEY:** What about strikes? I know there was a strike in the early nineties. Any other major strikes or high points?

[00:24:14] **HERB:** Well, over the years we had a number of shorter ones. Being where I was, I ended up being a picket captain. We used to make sure the guys showed up where they were supposed to be. Most of the guys were pretty good. You had the odd guy that just didn't want to participate. Those were dealt with. On an overall basis, when there was a strike, we used to go around, drop coffee off, make sure everybody's there, check them in. It worked out good. A lot of the strikes and a lot of the issues, at the end of the day, we didn't get everything that we wanted. In most cases, the union came out doing well.

[00:25:15] **HARVEY:** Do you remember what year the one in the early nineties was? Exactly what year? I don't remember myself exactly which year it was, but I know there was a strike in the early nineties.

[00:25:27] **HERB:** No, to be honest.

[00:25:29] **HARVEY:** Do you remember what it was about?

[00:25:31] **HERB:** Most likely, there was something about wages, automation, so and so forth. I can't really remember that, to be honest.

[00:25:43] **HARVEY:** What year did you retire?

[00:25:46] **HERB:** I'm 69 now, so at 65. I got injured when I was 64, so I stayed on till 65. I stayed on compo [worker's compensation] and then I retired at 65.

[00:26:03] **HARVEY:** What happened? How did you get injured?

[00:26:05] **HERB:** I was on lines, and I tore the heck out of my shoulder. 'Till I get a replacement, and I'm holding off on that, it's, you know. Over the years you get beat up and banged up.

[00:26:21] **HARVEY:** That was why you decided to retire at that point?

[00:26:23] **HERB:** Well, 65. One of the problems I think that's there now, you have more and more guys who don't want to retire. When I finally went in, the compensation board wanted me to go back to work. I thought, Jesus, how do I? I'm 65. In order to go through the claims and all that, they wanted me to go back to work. But I got out of it. Myself, I look at it this way here: if guys continue to work till they're 70 or 80, how the hell do the young guys get a crack at it? I'm about a month and a half shy of 48 years of seniority. What do I want to do, work down there till I'm 58 years of seniority? Nah, enough is enough. We enjoy ourselves now.

[00:27:20] **HARVEY:** How come you decided to get involved in the Pensioners Association?

[00:27:25] **HERB:** I know the guys, came up through the ranks with most of them. It's a way of keeping in touch. If they need a hand with anything, they can call on me. Simple as that. I've retired, but I haven't gone away. It's one of them things. I don't plan to go away. It's just part of the system.

[00:27:56] **HARVEY:** Did you get active as soon as you retired, or did you wait?

[00:28:01] **HERB:** I joined the Pensioners Association before I quit because, like I say, I know all the guys. I paid my dues. Which is an exorbitant amount of money! [laughs] No, I mean, for that amount it's well worth it to get the information and whatever. I know all the guys. To me, it was a natural progression. Leave one area, but you still have contact with everybody. It's a great thing.

[00:28:34] **HARVEY:** Ideal. Do you have a wrap-up statement? We're getting near the end. Looking back, what it all meant to you?

[00:28:41] **HERB:** Working on the waterfront, to me, it's got to be one of the greatest jobs around because you have all the freedom on the waterfront that you can afford. If I need money, I put an extra couple of shifts in, like if I'm behind on bills. All the way along, if I decided the wife and I were going to travel somewhere, pick up the phone and say, "Hey, I'm not going to be around for a while." There's very few jobs you can do that with. It's a terrific job. I hope nobody screws it up in the next little while because the employers are always trying to get something out of you. They'll try to take your freedom away. The freedom is one of the main things that the guys have. It's just a great thing.

[00:29:41] **HARVEY:** One other question. What was your feeling when containerization came in? What was your sense? I mean, things are changing now.

[00:29:52] **HERB:** When the containers first came in, initially, when I started in coastwise and saw how quickly it changes from the old manual [work] dumping sacks in the corner. I could see all you do is you have two guys hooking up four hooks, one in each eye, and there it is. So I knew the work was changing. I knew it was going to change rapidly but, for quite a while, didn't realize how quickly it would change.

I remember when we used to do hand-stowed pulp, eight bales came in. There's guys down below, and we hand-jived them in, threw them up in the wing, and that was eight bales at a time. Next thing you know the gantries came along; they took eight of those, and then they took 16 of those. Now they're doing 32 units at a time.

Automation is a great thing if you're included. What happens is there's more and more people that are getting excluded, and that's the sad part about it. It made it a lot easier. You get to a stage where you wonder what happens to the next generation. It's sad in that way, but you got to adapt. It's like anything else. When you break your leg and can't run, you just got to adapt. You got to learn to walk. I think working guys got to do the same. Look at what's available and make sure we get the work that's there. Just one of them things. If you don't learn to adapt, they roll over you. And you lose it.

[00:31:42] **HARVEY:** Anything else you'd like to add? Have we missed anything that's major?

[00:31:48] **HERB:** Myself, it's kind of neat to see the new people come in. Like in Vancouver now they got a lot of women moving in. It's good. Different perspective. The only thing is, you hope that everybody treats themselves in a little bit better way than what some of them did before.

No, it's good. Longshoring was a great job. That's why my son's a member now, too. Third generation. One of my grandsons—he's still little, but he's thinking that's not bad, too.

[00:32:27] **HARVEY:** A question on that one. In the United States, because of anti-nepotism alone, it's difficult to even get any relatives in. How does it work in Canada?

[00:32:41] **HERB:** It's not easy there either. They've changed the rules a number of years ago. For some reason, one of the presidents got into it where they started doing huge registrations. They put it on the internet, and you have people from the other side of the country applying. Every time you know there's something coming up, you got to apply. This is one of the arguments I used to have with the employer and with some of our own guys. You register 1,500 new people, and there's no work for them. I used to get madder than hell because I used to say, "How the hell can you expect people to hang around so far below the poverty line?" We expect them to be there, and the employer expects them to be there. To me, I used to argue and say 'that's criminal.' If there's work there, or if there's a chance where a person can make maybe not a great living but initially you got to make enough to survive. Otherwise they shouldn't register people, but that's what they got into.

It ends up now every time there is one of those—and they do that about every year or year and a half, where the word's out that they're going to register people—you just got to try to get one of the applications for the kids or for whatever. Now it's all picked out of the hat, so it's just the way it is. There's lots of our guys who wanted to get their kids in and couldn't.

[00:34:21] **HARVEY:** How'd you get your kid in?

[00:34:24] **HERB:** Well, he was a tradesman. He got registered when it was busy. He worked, and then I made him go back to school and become a mechanic. As a tradesperson, there was always a shortage. He's a certified heavy duty mechanic. Mind you, it took quite a while for him because apprenticeships weren't easy to come by even outside the industry. I guess everybody figures apprenticeships cost money for them; the companies don't want to do it if they don't have to. The next little while, trades are going to be really sought after.

That's how my kid got in. I made him go through the mechanics. He worked for a company outside the industry. We had a rule that if you're on the board, and if you leave to get a trade, if it's authorized by the local, they got to come back every six months and check in and tell us their progress. We used to write it in the bible—we call it the bible, to keep records of the membership and grievances and all the discipline, everything was in there. So [you] came back, and we had to see how you progressed on your apprenticeship. Then when you come back, you're supposed to go back in the spot where you had [been] . If you were on the lowest board, that's where you went back on. That's what worked for him. Mind you, being a mechanic, he got more hours than a guy who's just a laborer. He got to survive.

[00:36:00] **HARVEY:** Very interesting. Anything else you would like to add?

[00:36:05] **HERB:** Great job. Loved it. Love being a pensioner. I hope to collect a pension for a long time! [laughs] So everybody's got to work hard to continue! [laughs] No, it's a good job.

[00:36:18] **HARVEY:** Thank you, Herb.

[00:36:19] **HERB:** Ok.

[00:36:20] **HARVEY:** Much appreciated.

[00:36:22] **HERB:** All right.